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Article Heading

Bishop, Elizabeth
Feb. 8, 1911-Oct. 6, 1979

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Full Text

BISHOP, ELIZABETH
(February 8, 1911-October 6, 1979), American poet, was born in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her father died within a year of her birth and her mother was confined to a mental hospital a few years later. Bishop recast her childhood memories of staying with her mother's family in Canada in the short story "In the Village" and in "Poem":

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.

At age six she returned to Massachusetts to live with her father's family. Again the almost iconic details of her lonely and disjointed childhood formed the insights of her mature writing. The poem "In the Waiting Room" recounts her studying the exotic and somewhat horrifying photographs of naked African women in an issue of National Geographic while her aunt undergoes dental work in the next room. Overhearing a cry of pain, the child struggles to keep her bearings,

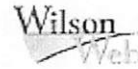
...to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.

But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.

Bishop read a lot and began to write, and spent the summers of her youth in Nova Scotia and Cape Cod. She enrolled at Vassar College,



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and contributed frequently to one of the school's literary journals. Bishop made the acquaintance of the poet Marianne Moore while a senior at Vassar; the friendship was an enduring one, and probably the chief factor in determining Bishop's career as a writer. Her career and life were interrupted by bouts of alcoholism, which, combined with the asthma from which she suffered, made her health always fragile. During college vacations and following graduation in 1934 Bishop traveled widely in Newfoundland, New York, England, Ireland, France, Italy, Spain, and North Africa. She lived in Key West, Florida, from 1938 to 1943, and in Mexico in 1943. In each of these places Bishop drew upon the natural world for material and inspiration. In "Florida" she observes "Tanagers embarassed by their flashiness,/and pelicans whose delight it is to clown." Geography--real, remembered, imaginary--is an important image-source for her best writing. "The Man-Moth," based on a newspaper misprint for mammoth, is a clever but poignant exploration of human frailty and survival:

Each night he must
be carried through artificial tunnels and
dream recurrent dreams...

Works by subject

Selected Works: Poetry--North & South, 1946; Poems: North & South (and) A Cold Spring 1955; Questions of Travel, 1965; The Complete Poems, 1969; Geography III, 1976; The Complete Poems 1927-1979, 1983; Collected Poems 1984. Nonfiction--Brazil, 1962; An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Poetry, 1972; The Collected Prose, 1984; One Art: Letters, edited by Robert Giroux, 1994. As translator--The Diary of "Helena Maley," 1957, reissued 1991.

Works about subject

Suggested Reading: American Literature March 1982; October 1983; American Poetry Winter 1990; American Poetry Review March/April 1978; January/February 1988; Contemporary Literature Summer 1984; Fall 1984; Summer 1985, Winter 1988; Critical Inquiry Summer 1987; Kenyon Review Winter 1984; Spring 1989; Massachusetts Review Summer 1983; Modern Philology May 1990; Modern Poetry Studies Winter 1977; Nation September 28, 1946; New England Quarterly December 1984; September 1994; New Republic April 4, 1983; March 19, 1984; November 27, 1989; New York Review of Books February 16, 1984; January 13, 1994; June 9, 1994; New York Times October 8, 1979; New York Times Book Review May 27, 1956; June 1, 1969; February 27, 1983; January 15, 1984; January 14, 1990; New Yorker October 5, 1946; April 1, 1985; September 15, 1986; September 30, 1991; March 28, 1994; Raritan Summer 1984; Salmagundi Spring/Summer 1973; Summer/Fall 1974; Sewanee Review Winter 1985; Winter 1996; Shenandoah 1981-1982; Southern Atlantic Quarterly Summer 1983; Southern Review October 1977; Times Literary Supplement June 3, 1983; April 27, 1984; July 27-August 2, 1990; Twentieth Century Literature January 1966; Summer/Fall 1984; Virginia Quarterly Review Spring 1984; Vogue April 1953; Wilson Quarterly Summer 1989; World Literature Today

Winter 1977. Costello, B. Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery, 1991; Fountain, G. and Brazeau, P. Remembering Elizabeth Bishop, 1994; Goldensohn, L. Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry, 1993; Gould, J. Modern American Women Poets, 1985; Kalstone, D. Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell, 1989; Kalstone, D. Five Temperaments, 1977; Magill, F. N. (ed) Great Women Writers, 1994; McCake, S. Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss, 1994; McNeill, H. Voices and Visions, 1987; Merrin, J. An Enabling Humility: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Uses of Tradition, 1990; Middlebrook, D. and Yolom, S. (eds.) Coming into the Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century, 1985; Miller, B. C. Elizabeth Bishop, 1993; Parker, R. D. The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, 1988; Rotella, G. L. Reading and Writing Nature, 1990; Schwartz, L. and Estess, S. (eds.) Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art, 1983; Stevenson, A. Elizabeth Bishop, 1966; Travisano, T. Elizabeth Bishop and Howard Nemerov, 1983.

Descriptor

poets ; children's writers; WRITERS ; children's writers; Poets ;
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